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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study investigated the interpersonal meaning of karaoke to its participants in East Asia. Current research suggests that the popularity of karaoke in East Asia is associated with the cultural value of harmony and the indirect mode of communication in this region. Subjects, 51 East Asian undergraduate-level students who had participated in karaoke, were interviewed concerning the social contexts in which karaoke takes place, the functions of karaoke in those social contexts, and the extent to which karaoke participants communicate interpersonally in a karaoke session. Interviewees reported that they sang karaoke to celebrate or release tension. Karaoke was found not only to be able to provide topics for conversation but also to become communication per se. Besides generating new verbal and nonverbal messages among participants, lyrics adopted for karaoke may well become the participants' own messages. (Contains 30 references.) (Author/RS)

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Karaoke and Interpersonal Communication in East Asia

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Abstract:

Karaoke and Interpersonal Communication in East Asia

Current research suggests that the popularity of karaoke in East Asia is associated with the cultural value of harmony and the indirect mode of communication in this region. East Asian students who had participated in karaoke were interviewed to answer the following questions: (a) What are the social contexts in which karaoke tends to take place? (b) what are the functions of karaoke in those social contexts? and (c) to what extent can karaoke participants communicate interpersonally in a karaoke session? Interviewees reported that they sang karaoke to celebrate or release tension. Karaoke was found not only to be able to provide topics for conversation but also to become communication *per se*. Besides generating new verbal and nonverbal messages among participants, lyrics adopted for karaoke may well become the participants' own messages.

Karaoke and Interpersonal Communication in East Asia

> Karaoke, the Japanese fad of singing along to music videos, has swept Taiwan with such force that singing schools demand tuitions as high as [US]$75 an hour.
>
> --*National Geographic* (November 1993)

While Baig (1991) notes that karaoke is infiltrating American popular culture, Goldberg (1992) indicates that karaoke is permeating American life. LaSalle (1993) even discovered that "For some people karaoke isn't fad but a way of life" (p. E1). However, anyone who has ever stayed in East Asia over the past decade would find that LaSalle's statement is more true of East Asians than of North Americans.

Karaoke, literally "empty orchestra" in Japanese, refers to singing with a sing-along machine which provides the singers with pre-recorded accompaniment and vocal. It is described as a national obsession in Japan (Wolpin, 1992). In disclosing the secret of her longevity, a 103-year-old Japanese woman said that "I drink sake every night . . . Then I sing the karaoke" (Dahlby, 1994, p. 111). Karaoke is also considered Japan's most notable gift to the world after the Walkman (Johnstone, 1993, p. 58). In China, the army in Guangzhou military region was found to run businesses including karaoke bars for profit making (China News Digest, August 18, 1994). While seeking connections to cover up illegal prostitution, a karaoke bar in Shanghai was swindled by a spurious police officer (*Ka la*, 1994). Recently, politicians in Taiwan participated in karaoke to enhance their

popularity. For example, the Mayor of Taipei, Ta-chou Huang, sang ten songs at a party for members of the city council (*Huang Da-zhou*, 1994). The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frederick Chien, sang at a party for journalists in Taiwan (*Dan ni*, 1993) and at an international party in Indonesia (*Qian Fu*, 1994). The Minister of the Interior, Po-hsiung Wu, who is perceived to sing better than any other high-ranking government official, "has faced a challenge from the Minister of Foreign Affairs" ("*Tan Ni*," 1993). In a recent issue of *National Geographic*, the force of karaoke in Taiwan is quantified as follows:

> Karaoke, the Japanese fad of singing along to music videos, has swept Taiwan with such force that singing schools demand tuitions as high as [US]$75 an hour. (Zich, 1993, p. 19)

Karaoke was introduced in Japan in the mid-1970s (Johnstone, 1993). Before it became widespread, karaoke "took off in the small bars where lachrymose salarymen like to drown their sorrows after work" (Johnstone, 1993, p. 58). Nowadays, two broad forms of karaoke are adopted in East Asia: performance-oriented singing in a restaurant or bar, and relationship-oriented singing in an isolated, sound-proof room. The former is public singing in front of an audience, while the latter occurs between two or more friends behind a closed door. The boundary between the two is usually less clear in non-commercial settings, such as singing at a private

home or at an organizational party. Nevertheless, in commercial settings singing with friends in a sound-proof karaoke box is far more common than singing to an audience.

Although karaoke seems closely tied to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships for many East Asians, only the performance-oriented karaoke in Taiwan has been addressed in a previously presented paper (Ma, 1994). This research, therefore, intended to fill this void by investigating the relationship between karaoke and interpersonal communication in East Asia.

Music, Culture, and Communication

Communication scholars have established that music is a form of communication (e.g., Brentar et al., 1994; Frith, 1981; Gonzáles & Flores, 1994; Lewis, 1987; Lull, 1987b; Rasmussen, 1994). Lewis (1987) writes that music is "an ordered system of meaning and symbols in social interaction" (p. 199). Similarly, Gonzáles and Flores (1994) state that "the musical form can be thought of as a symbolic resource for community members to use creatively to reproduce competing and complementary values, ideas, and events that are the substance of the shared experience" (p. 39). According to Lull (1987b), as "a universally recognized synthesis of the substance and style of our existence," music combines "personal, social, and cultural signification that is confused with no other variety of communication" (p. 10). In a different essay, he writes that "listeners create imaginative personal and social uses of

music in all cultural contexts" through the following three ways of participation: physical, emotional, and cognitive (Lull, 1987a, p. 141).

Music not only serves to define, reflect and reinforce cultural values but also play utilitarian roles in various interpersonal contexts. Lull (1987a) summarizes these roles as follows:

> It helps lessen the inhibitions of people in social situations, facilitates getting attention and approval, provides security in foreign environments, provides topics for conversations, contributes to peer group acceptance and reinforcement, is an appropriate audio backdrop for romantic and sexual exchanges, provides a forum for family communication (for instance, group singing), and generates a constant resource for general entertainment among other uses. (p. 149)

In short, music as a form of communication represents human culture in various ways. It serves as a means and an end product of communication in different contexts.

Karaoke and Interpersonal Communication in East Asia

Karaoke can be regarded as a special form of musical involvement in which there is no clear distinction between the singer and the listener. When several friends sing together in a karaoke box, they sing and listen simultaneously. While the form of traditional singing or performance-oriented karaoke resembles public speaking in many respects, singing

with friends in a karaoke box and informal conversations are alike and are usually coexistent. Barnlund (1962) argues that the traditional speaker-centered philosophy of communication should be replaced by a meaning-centered philosophy of communication. He emphasizes that communication is a process of "creating a meaning" (p. 200) instead of a consequence of "the intelligence and credibility of the source" (p. 199). Karaoke, as a form of communication, can be better understood from a meaning-centered rather than a singer-centered philosophy of communication.

Previous research suggests that a major difference between East Asian and North American communication is the "indirect" versus "direct" mode of communication (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1988; Yum, 1988). Indirect communication in East Asia has been associated with the cultural value of interpersonal harmony (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1988; Yum, 1988). Barnlund (1989) also indicates that while in the United States "Words are the primary tool of discourse," in Japan "words are somewhat distrusted and seen as less reliable guides to a complex and elusive reality" (p. 42). To put it in another way, "words are *a*, but not *the*, means of communication" in Japan (Barnlund, 1989, p. 42). Karaoke, as a, or another, means of communication, is likely to facilitate interpersonal communication in a cultural context that discourages explicit expressions.

While North Americans tend to segregate social communication from business communication, East Asians were found to value a merger of the two. In other words, interpersonal relationships in unofficial settings have a direct impact on formal decision-making. For example, Goldman (1994) states:

> Japanese prefer to blur the line between personal and public relationship building by encouraging an informal continuation of ningensei [human beingness] outside of the negotiating table and within social arenas of cabarets, restaurants, bars, golf courses, hot springs, and country clubs. (p. 37)

Chang and Holt (1991) also revealed that it is important to establish *guan-xi* (*kuan-hsi*), or relations, to accomplish personal and business goals in the Chinese culture. The non-separation between private and business life in East Asia is likely to facilitate the patronization of commercial karaoke by many business people.

Research Questions

Although current literature suggests a close link between karaoke and interpersonal communication in East Asia, no empirical data had been collected to investigate this link from an insider's perspective. As an exploratory study, this research intended to discover the interpersonal meaning of karaoke to its participants in East Asia. More specifically, answers to the following research questions are sought: (a)

What are the social contexts in which karaoke tends to take place? (b) what are the functions of karaoke in those social contexts? and (c) to what extent can karaoke participants communicate interpersonally in a karaoke session? The term "karaoke" as used in these questions refers to the type of karaoke that takes place among a few (usually between 2-6) people in an isolated room in a karaoke entertainment center (a karaoke box), instead of the type of karaoke involving public singing and an audience.

Interviews

Fifty-one East Asian undergraduate-level college students (*M* age = 22.3 years, *SD* = 2.3 years) in Taiwan and the United States were interviewed between December 1993 and July 1994 to supply answers to the three research questions. Their major areas of study were education, English, German, Japanese, psychology, or sociology. Thirty of them were female (23 in Taiwan and 7 in the U.S.) and 21 (18 in Taiwan and 3 in the U.S.) were male. Among the 10 students interviewed in the United States, 6 were from Japan, 3 were from Taiwan, and 1 was from Hong Kong. The students interviewed in the United States were either short-term exchange students or recently arrived from their home country, so all the interviews were based on the karaoke experience in their home country. All interviewees had participated in karaoke at least three times, while most of them were frequent participants. Each interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. Mandarin Chinese was

used in the interviews with students from Taiwan and Hong Kong, while Japanese students were interviewed in English. Notes were taken during the interview. In addition to inquiries regarding demographic data and research questions, interviewees were also asked to make additional comments on karaoke.

Results

The major themes extracted from the elicited responses to the three research questions were surprisingly similar. Sometimes they seemed to be repeating what a previously interviewed subject had said though most of them did not know one another. The patterns emerged from the responses can be summarized as follows:

The Social Contexts of Karaoke

All interviewees reported that they usually went to a karaoke entertainment center with more than one friend. They sang karaoke with their good friends. Occasionally, a stranger but a friend's friend could join them. None of them perceived karaoke as being a "dating" place, though it is possible to develop a romantic relationship from singing together initially. Four mentioned that they sometimes went singing with their immediate family members such as parents and siblings.

Singing karaoke most likely took place when there was an event to "celebrate" or when one felt relaxed. For example, a female student in Taiwan mentioned that

> We [close classmates] usually went singing karaoke after a major exam. We were also likely to sing karaoke on one's birthday. You need to have a good mood to be there singing . . .

Karaoke was often arranged as "the second session" of a gathering, i.e., an after-dinner entertaining session. Sixteen Taiwanese students mentioned that they went singing karaoke when they felt the meeting with their friends during a meal was too brief so found a karaoke entertainment center to continue the gathering. However, they could also go without eating a meal first.

A Japanese female student and five Taiwanese students who had off-campus work experience reported that they karaoked with colleagues and their superiors on special occasions.

The Social Functions of Karaoke

The most commonly identified functions of karaoke were tension release, relational enhancement, and creating a sense of belonging. The three, however, were not mutually exclusive. Tension release, which usually implies more spontaneous functioning and less pretense, can facilitate relational development. Relational enhancement, in turn, builds up a sense of belonging. A Japanese female student described how the three functions were interrelated in her experience:

> In a karaoke box we felt relaxed and relieved from our work. I could usually find a "different person" in my

close friends. They probably found me very different too while singing karaoke. We interacted each other with our "real" or "unmasked" self. For example, we screamed and laughed to each other when we were excited. This kind of interaction with minimal pretense significantly shortened our distance and made us feel closer to each other.

Most Taiwanese students reported the same feeling. They also added "grabbing microphones from one another [in a non-hostile manner]" as a behavior commonly observed in karaoke boxes (because usually only two microphones are provided in a karaoke box). They said that karaoke makes a person free from social formalities and thus expose his or her real self to others. A 23-year-old female student in Taiwan emphasized that she enjoyed being with her friends in a karaoke box, rather than a coffee shop:

> It's better to sing karaoke with good friends than to sit talking in a coffee shop, because we would be running out of topics soon in a coffee shop.

A Japanese male, a Taiwanese male, and a Taiwanese female mentioned that it is much easier to strike a business deal when both parties become less defensive through singing together. The Taiwanese male provided the following account:

> Through informal interactions at a karaoke center, you have a better understanding of your business partner. When both parties are relaxed, they become less defensive and more frank with each other. Therefore, mutual trust

can be easily established. In addition, Conflicts are likely avoided under this circumstance. . . .

All interviewees could see the potential to develop a romantic relationship through karaoke participation, though only about one third of them (16) had seen it happening in their social circle. Sharing feelings indirectly through singing was perceived as being safe since it is ambiguous and natural. For example, a Taiwanese male student made the following comments:

> My sentiments can be easily transmitted through singing a particular song. I would be abashed to verbalize these thoughts to anyone. Most girls would also feel more comfortable accepting a loving thought from a not-very-close boy in such a subtle manner. Even if she doesn't like me, neither of us will feel embarrassed, because I'm just singing a song. . . .

Communicating via Karaoke singing

The interviewees noticed that various meanings had been created for their interpersonal relationships during their karaoke participation. A phenomenon reported by many was that participants tended to sing enthusiastically and loudly when a common life experience was identified in the lyrics of a particular song. Participants were generally aware that a shared experience was being implied in the way of their singing. A Taiwanese female made the following comments:

> I really like the feeling of singing together with my friends in a space uninterrupted by the outside world [in a karaoke box]. We can share a lot without saying a word during that moment. I also tried to avoid selecting songs that would remind a friend of an unpleasant past.

A Taiwanese male commented that lyrics usually reflected the thoughts of the person who made the selection, and others usually realized the link. A Japanese female considered it a good way to know a person through singing karaoke because "the type of songs a person likes to sing tells me of this person's taste and life style." The only interviewee from Hong Kong (male) further indicated the following:

> Lyrics usually sound better than our own spoken words since they are beautifully written. Therefore, communicating through lyrics can be more appealing to a person of opposite sex than through my clumsy speech.

A female student in Taiwan added that "sometimes it is easier to develop an intimate relationship under the romantic atmosphere that karaoke can create, since sentimental messages are more acceptable to both persons under that kind of atmosphere." Another Taiwanese female, however, endorsed the statement only conditionally by saying that the development of a romantic relationship through karaoke singing is largely dependent upon who the participants are. According to her, if the two were attracted to each other at the beginning, then

karaoke singing can be a good "catalyst." In other words, karaoke *per se* is unlikely to matchmake.

Karaoke has also provided topics for conversations among participants. A 20-year-old Taiwanese female reported the following experiences:

> Besides singing, we also engaged in discussions of lyrics and [professional] singers. We became more familiar with each other through these discussions. I also got to know what songs were popular, and the knowledge in turn made me more sociable in later karaoke sessions.

Conclusions and Discussion

The close relationship between karaoke and interpersonal communication in East Asia suggested in current literature has been strongly supported in this study. Based on the interviews conducted for this study, the following conclusions seem to be warranted:

First, karaoke has permeated East Asian cultures in various ways. It provides an opportunity for a small group of people to spend some time "doing things" together. Johnstone (1993) indicates that in the mid-1970s "lachrymose salarymen" in Japan liked to "drown their sorrows" in small karaoke bars after work. The data collected for this study suggest that karaoke is also a good way to celebrate.

Karaoke is popular among different age groups in East Asia. For example, college students sing karaoke to relax after a major exam or to celebrate one's birthday. Parents

engage in family communication with their children through singing karaoke. Organizational affairs can also be deliberated in a karaoke box. It can be the only item on an agenda for reunion or a pleasant extension of a dinner party. While after-dinner speech is common in North America where words is *the* means of communication, after-dinner karaoke seems to be preferred in East Asia where words is only *a* means of communication.

Second, karaoke appears to be performing some important social functions for East Asians. Lull (1987a) writes that music can help "lessen the inhibitions of people" (p. 149). As a special form of music involvement, karaoke is also able to facilitate spontaneous functioning. Karaoke participants are more likely to show their unmasked self when inhibitions are diminished. As a consequence, their interpersonal distance is shortened and interpersonal relationships are enhanced. While self-disclosure is often used as a strategy for uncertainty reduction in initial interactions in North America (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), the relatively uninhibited behaviors during karaoke participation seem to have helped East Asians reduce uncertainty and thus promote mutual understanding in interpersonal relationships.

Karaoke also facilitates interpersonal communication in a cultural context discouraging explicit expressions. One reason East Asians enjoy singing karaoke is because they can communicate via singing, or via selecting songs for singing,

whose texts contain thoughts that they might feel awkward saying in normal verbal communication. In other words, by communicating implicitly, East Asians minimize the odds to offend or embarrass each other. Through singing karaoke, their emotional ties are also established in the absence of direct emotional expressions.

Finally, verbal and nonverbal messages can be encoded and decoded in various ways among karaoke participants. The selection of a song *per se* can disclose one's personality, taste, emotional state, intention, etc. to his or her singing partners. After the selection is made, others can send their positive feedback through singing enthusiastically with him or her. A strong feeling shared among the participants is further identified through a joint highlighting of some lyrics while singing the song. In other words, the propositional, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts that a regular speech can perform (Searle, 1969) are identified through words or non-words during their karaoke participation.

Lull (1987a) notes that music can be used to "provide topics for conversation" (p. 149). In this study, karaoke was found not only to be able to provide topics for conversation but also to become communication *per se*. Besides generating new verbal and nonverbal messages, lyrics adopted for karaoke may well become the participants' own messages.

This study has demonstrated how and why karaoke is another form of communication in East Asia. The results

yielded in this study also suggest to communication scholars a broad perspective for studying intercultural communication. In addition, Gumpert and Cathcart (1986) remind us that in order to understand "the whole of the communication process" in modern societies the mutual influence between media and interpersonal communication should not be overlooked (pp. 11-12). The investigation of a relatively new media, karaoke, in this study, has helped us visualize how interpersonal communication can be facilitated by it in East Asia.

This study has two possible limitations. First, the relatively small sample may have decreased the generalizability of this research though the clear pattern emerged in the study seems to have denied this possibility. Second, only undergraduate-level college students were interviewed in this study. Their perceived relationship between karaoke and interpersonal communication may be slightly different, if not very different, from other age groups such as middle-aged and elderly people in East Asia.

In the future, research can be conducted to study karaoke as a form of interpersonal communication between different age groups and genders when a much larger sample is available. In addition, since karaoke is also becoming popular in North America, an investigation into the differences in the perceived role of karaoke in interpersonal communication between East Asians and North Americans is likely to further shed light on intercultural communication.

Endnotes

[1]The *Pinyin* system of romanization is used to transliterate Chinese names and special Chinese terms in this paper.

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